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# THE HIGH SCHOOL JOURNAL

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## THE CREATIVE INSTINCT AND PLAYMAKING\*

With an announcement of the plan of *The Carolina Playmakers*, and an account of their initial performances of original folk-plays as given in *The Play-House* recently constructed in the auditorium of the public school at Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

By FREDERICK H. KOCH

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WHEN President Wilson set aside October 12, 1918, the anniversary of the discovery of America, as Liberty Day, and suggested in his proclamation the "pageant" as an appropriate means of commemorating the event, it was a fresh recognition of the dramatic form as a potent means of stirring the imagination of the people to a greater civic unity—to a higher patriotism.

It recalled the way in which the wise Greeks regarded their dramatic performances as patriotic rituals for educating the mind of the people to virtue, and to the high ideals of Hellenic citizenship. It reminds us, too, of the way in which the Church once

cherished and utilized the powerful appeal of the dramatic as a means of instructing the ignorant crowds of the mediaeval cathedral in the mysteries of religion. And we remember that from these moving and colorful rites, from these simple pageants of the chancel, came the popular English folk drama, and at length the achievement of our Anglo-Saxon race in the all-comprehending plays of a Shakespeare.

But our modern attitude has failed to cherish the tremendous educative forces inherent in the drama,

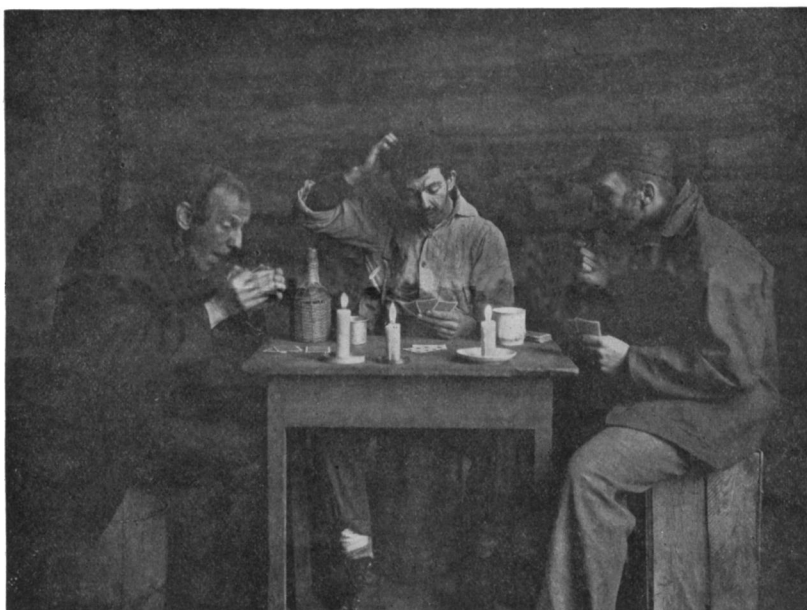
and the stage today seems to have fallen into the unfortunate ways of amusement merely, quite from the original high purposes. Perhaps much of the fault lies in our neglect of the important place of the play impulse in education. We know that the dramatic in-

stinct is universal, that it is a form of the creative impulse born in every child, and that it has given to the peoples of the world in the plays of a Sophocles, of a Shakespeare, of a Molière, of an Ibsen, a republic of active literature—a enduring voice.

But in actual practice education is still confined for the most part to the school buildings and to the school books. Our teaching of litera-

ture has little contact with the sunny playhouse for which Will Shakespeare wrote. Although we admit that by far the greater number of impressions come directly through the eye and the ear rather than through the medium of the printed page, we teachers have neglected the visual and auditory appeal of the dramatic—perhaps the most potent form of instruction yet discovered by man.

Play is the universal expression of the creative instinct in man. It is "the purest and most spiritual activity of mankind. . . . It holds the source of all that is good," proclaimed the great teacher Friedrich Froebel long ago. I think it would not be too



Scene from *When Witches Ride*, a play of Carolina folk superstition by Elizabeth A. Lay. Uncle Benny (George McF. McKie) left; Ed, his son (Walter H. Williamson) center; Jake, a railroad engineer (George Denny) right.

\* A paper read at the meeting of the North Carolina English Teachers' Association at Greensboro, North Carolina, May 2, 1919.

much to say that every man who has achieved a great work did so because he had reached a play interest in it. Man expresses his true nature in his play rather than to his enforced labor. Dr. Harlow Brooks of New York University does not exaggerate when he insists that "in a sense, our best work is done in play time," and further that "crime itself is in large part founded on a perverted play instinct." This is illustrated further by the statement of Professor Irving Fisher, economist of Yale, when he declares, "Workmen, like all other human beings, long for self-expression and will get it destructively if they cannot get it constructively. Organized strikes are self-expression." And the pioneer modern teacher, Mr. G. Stanley Hall, well defined the dramatic instinct as applied to education as "the propensity to express the larger life of the race" and declares that "no agency of culture is more truly or purely humanistic."

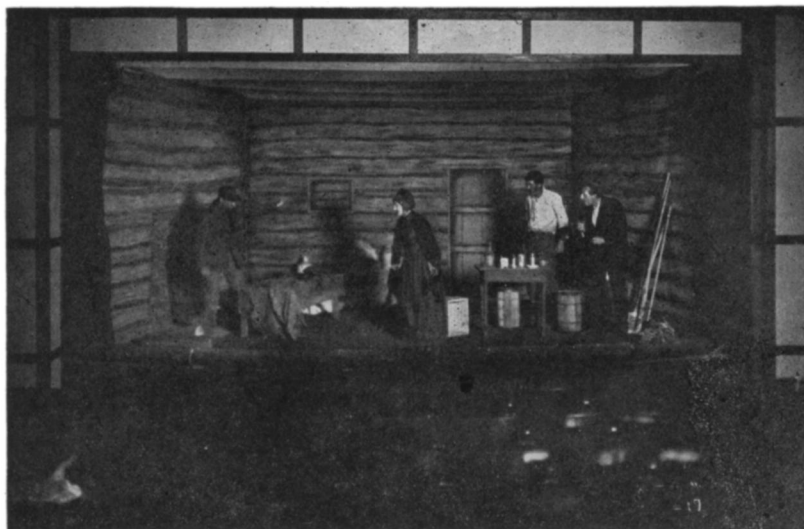
The Children's Educational Theater of New York has demonstrated the values of the extensive use of dramatic in the schools as a means of directing the emotions and the imagination of the child along constructive lines. The benefits to be derived from such training are as yet but faintly discerned. Professor Ward pertinently

suggests that such practice is invaluable in stimulating motor response to dormant emotion and in cultivating the will. "Any stimulation of a purely intellectual kind issues only remotely and indirectly in action," and "too much abstraction in the teaching method is likely to result, at least to the child, in a weakened capacity for action." It is time for us to consider seriously the perils of educational methods which have been almost wholly intellectual. It is high time to devote ourselves seriously as teachers to the training of the underlying emotions of the child, to the education of the will in terms of action, and to the cultivation of the creative instinct.

More and more the school is utilizing the dramatic instinct, (especially in the teaching of literature, history, and the arts) as a means of cultivating the creative impulse in the child. The results of such methods have been refreshing indeed, and suggest new vistas to the teachers of tomorrow. Ex-President Elliott, of Harvard, speaks with heartening promise of the work of The Children's Educational Theatre, "Here is the tremendous power over children utilized for their good. . . . I say that this power, developed in a very striking way, is one that ought to be at least in



Scene from *When Witches Ride*, a play of Carolina folk superstition, by Elizabeth A. Lay. Phoebe Ward, witch (Alga E. Leavitt) and her toad Gibbie.



THE PLAY-STAGE OF THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS, showing a scene from *When Witches Ride* by Elizabeth A. Lay. The cabin scene is home-made having been designed and painted especially for this play by the playwright.

every school in this country, and moreover I believe that it is going to be."

#### THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS

THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS, recently formed at the University of North Carolina, is an organization in which the school—whether it be a university, college, normal school, high school, or rural school—is conceived as a radial center of communal expression through the performance of original plays and pageants. The aim of THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS is to translate the spirit of Carolina into plays truly representative of the life of the people, of the folk of Carolina. The idea is communal—an institution of neighborliness, of the common good and the common happiness. It is a society of amateurs, of *amatores*, in the original sense of the word *amo*, I love. For the spirit of communal play cannot be

formed by the machinery of modern organization merely, it must come spontaneously from the heart of man. It must be an expression of the joy of the worker in striving to create, to inform something into beauty—into poetry.

The Carolina country from the mountains to the sea affords a rich store of tradition and romance for the making of new literary and dramatic forms fresh from the soil. Among these are the legends of the "Lost Colony" and the Croatans; the tales of the intrepid pirate, Blackbeard; of such indomitable pioneers as Daniel Boone, Flora McDonald, and the Town Builders of Old Salem; the lore and the balladry of the mountain folk—a wonder-field for the maker of plays and songs of the people. Already a number of interesting plays have been written in the University course in Dramatic Composition, English 31. These are native plays in the full sense of the word—plays of the mountain people, of negro types, of village and plantation life, of the fisher folk—written by native sons and daughters of Carolina. There remains to

be written the many-sided drama of the thrilling new life of Carolina today—of her contribution to America.

Three of these original plays were staged as the initial program of THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS on March 14th and 15th in their newly-constructed Play-House in the Chapel Hill School Auditorium. *When Witches Ride*, a play of Carolina folk superstition by Elizabeth A. Lay, is based on the author's actual observations as a rural school teacher, of the life of the people in the back country of Northampton County. It is a play vivid in characterization and powerful in its appeal to the imagination. Beside writing the play the author designed and painted the cabin scene for her play. This is an interesting illustration of the versatility of these amateur playmakers. Her prologue, entitled "The Heritage," suggests admirably the spirit and the purpose of our native folk playmaking:



Thomas Wolfe as Buck Gavin, a mountain outlaw, in the title role of his own play, *The Return of Buck Gavin*, a tragedy of the mountain people.

"We mock with facts the Southern folk-belief,  
And so forget the eternal quest that strove  
With signs and tales to symbolize the awe  
Of powers in heaven and earth still undefined.  
Yet may we catch the child-like wondering  
Of our old negroes and the country folk,  
And live again in simple times of faith  
And fear and wonder, if we stage their life.  
Then witches ride the stormy, thundering sky  
And signs and omens fill believing minds,  
Then old traditions live in simple speech  
And ours the heritage of wondering!"

Another folk play, *The Return of Buck Gavin*, by Thomas Wolfe, a stalwart youth from the mountains of western North Carolina, represents with fine restraint and genuine dramatic force the tragedy of a mountain outlaw. The author himself appeared in the title role and created a heroic and beautiful portrait of the tragic figure of the mountain chief. In the third play, *What Will Barbara Say?* again the playwright, Miss Minnie Shepherd Sparrow, took the part of the leading character in her play. The theme

is the feminist movement in higher education, and the conflict in woman between Cupid and a professional career. It is a romantic comedy of felicitous phrasing in the dialogue, and redolent with the traditions of "Old Carolina" and with the romance of the life of our Chapel Hill folk. Like the other plays it is the result of the author's own observation and experience.

THE PLAY-HOUSE is an institution of co-operative folk-arts. Its adjustable stage, its scenery, lighting, settings, and costumes are home-made, designed and executed by our amateur playmakers at Chapel Hill. THE PLAY-HOUSE is an institution of neighborliness—A House of Play—of play that is not amusement merely,

but recreation on the plane of imagination, of play that will be truly re-creation! So it was conceived by the imagination of Youth, built by the sons and daughters of Carolina, and now dedicated by them to all the people. Being adjustable the stage equipment of THE PLAY-HOUSE may be readily adapted to any town hall or school auditorium. It is the hope of THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS that it may serve as a model for school stages elsewhere, that it may serve the people everywhere as a radial center, a creative center—that it may carry on the idea of folk play-making throughout the State, and beyond—that it may help to make the people of Carolina (to use President Graham's beautiful phrase) "productive and happy."\*

In these times of democratic striving there is everywhere an awakening of the folk consciousness, yearning for fresh expression. The war has thrilled the masses everywhere with the comradeship of great co-operative action—on the battle fronts, in the heroic pageant of the tragic conflict; at home, in the pageant of exalted community spirit in the campaigns of the Liberty Loans, of the Y. M. C. A., and of the Red Cross. This new spirit of neighborliness, of co-opera-

tive communal action, should be cherished and directed in the arts of peace as in the time of war, in a living patriotism, in a new republic of active literature.

As did the Greeks and far-seeing Elizabethan forebears, so should we the people of this New Day find a fresh interpretation of our awakened folk consciousness in new dramatic forms adequate to express the ideals of our new democracy, of our rebirth of Liberty, of our larger conception of the kingdom of humanity.

Such expression alone will satisfy the heart of man and give him an abiding happiness. The individual finds his fullest expression in giving the best that is in him to the common good, his highest happiness, in contributing his best to the common happiness.

Then again, in good time, from the creative joy of man will flower forth a new beauty, a new song of the folk, a new drama of the people.

### PREPAREDNESS IN THE SCHOOLS

DURING the great "preparedness" agitation that swept over the country in the first part of the war, the State of New York passed a law making it compulsory that all boys from sixteen to nineteen (with certain exceptions) receive military training.

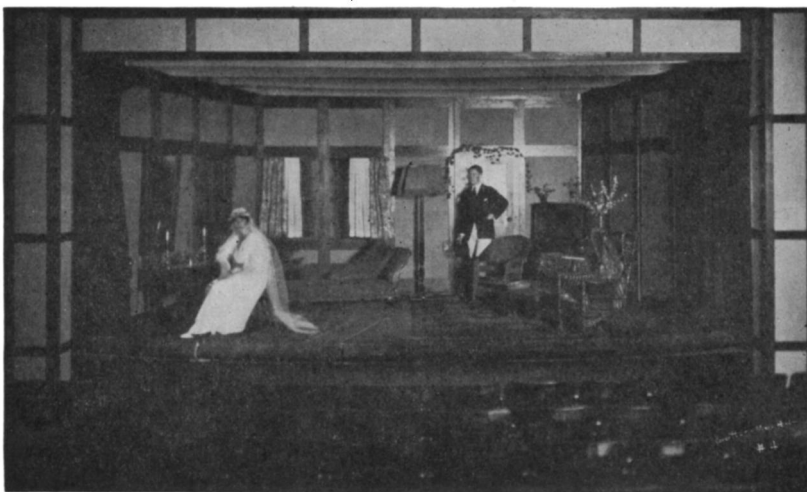
The State Committee on Education has just been studying the effects of this law and has come to the following conclusions:

First—The course of training is too brief to be of any military value.

Second—It interferes needlessly with school work and has thrown into confusion the whole educational system.

The committee therefore comes to the conclusion that "a training for a high type of citizenship and good physique can be attained better through other methods," the chief of which are physical education and summer camps.

This is sound sense. Even the war worshipping Germans never put military training into the schools.—*The Independent*.



THE PLAY-STAGE of THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS, showing the home-made, adjustable stage setting used in the play *What Will Barbara Say?* a romance of Chapel Hill by Minnie Shepherd Sparrow.

\* The University Extension Division is planning a series of bulletins designed to give practical suggestions to teachers and community leaders for carrying on the work of playmaking and pageantry throughout the state.